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# Adapting Action Learning Strategies to Operationalize Reflection in the Workplace

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## Abstract

### The Problem

Organizations and human resources development (HRD) leaders are challenged to rethink and adapt learning and development strategies to address current and future needs. Yet, performance demands—as well as limited space, time, and resources—mean employees need to learn on their own. Not everyone knows how to do that well. The question arises: How can HRD better support employee learning?

### The Solution

Reflective learning practices based on action learning (AL) support work-based learning. AL "tools" help peers learn by working together in diverse groups of nonexperts on real tasks to gain new perspectives and learn to frame and solve challenges.

### The Stakeholders

This article shows, through a review of existing reflective processes and tools, how HRD practitioners can adapt these practices to help groups of peers and teams learn while working, to support the organization and its members in fast-changing environments.

**Keywords**

action learning, reflective practice, action learning conversations, operationalizing reflection, human resource development

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## Introduction

Over the last 20 years, action learning (AL) has emerged as a key learning approach for organizations. AL is used for strategic leadership development, knowledge management, organizational development, human resources, executive coaching, and team dynamics (Marquardt, 1999; O'Neil & Marsick, 2007; Pedler, 1997). Because AL helps users question current reality and develop new perspectives, it also has the capacity to equip individuals, teams, and organizations to more effectively respond to change and develop new learning (Marquardt, 1999).

In this article, we first define AL and discuss the role of reflection and reflective practices in AL design. We then present an example of an AL reflective practice, action learning conversations (ALCs) (Marsick & Maltbia, 2009; O'Neil & Marsick, 2009, 2014), used in a leadership workshop. We then share examples of other reflective processes and tools often used in AL that can support learning through work. We show how AL reflective practices can be transferred back on the job and conclude by discussing implications for human resources development (HRD) practitioners. Our purpose is to provide HRD practitioners with a range of practical options for reflective practice which support people to efficiently and effectively learn while simultaneously handling difficult and challenging work situations.

## Background on AL

The core premise of AL is that learning can be facilitated through questions and dialogue which help participants see different perspectives as they work together on a problem. AL develops "questioners" rather than question "answerers," organic risk-takers rather than functional experts, and leaders rather than specialists (McNulty, 1979, p. 18). Focusing on the right questions rather than the right answers underscores what one does not know as well as what one does know (Mumford, 1995). Marquardt (1999) summarizes action learning as

> a dynamic process that involves a small group of people solving real problems, while at the same time focusing on what they are learning and how their learning can benefit each group member, the group itself and the organization as a whole. (p. 14)

There is often confusion around what AL is and how it can be designed and implemented (Brook et al., 2012). Table 1 shows selected definitions commonly used in AL that distinguish it from other forms of experience-based learning. Its foundation is peers taking action in small groups on meaningful problems and learning while doing so.

### *Reflection in AL*

O'Neil (1999) identified four schools of AL practice: the scientific school, the tacit school, the experiential school, and the critical reflection school. (See Table 2 for key components of each school.) An important distinction among approaches is whether and how participants learn through intentional and purposefully designed phases of

**Table 1.** Selected Definitions of Action Learning.

| | |
|---|---|
| Revans (1982) | Action learning is a means of development, intellectual, emotional, or physical that requires its subjects, through responsible involvement in some real, complex, and stressful problem, to achieve intended change to improve their observable behavior henceforth in the problem field. |
| Pedler (1997) | Action learning is an approach to the development of people in organizations which takes the task as a vehicle for learning. Action learning implies both self-development and organizational development. |
| McGill & Beaty (2001) | A continuous process of learning and reflection supported by colleagues with an intention of getting things done. Through action learning, individuals learn with and from each other by working on real problems and learning from experience. |
| O'Neil & Marsick (2009) | An approach to working with and developing people that uses work on an actual project or problem as the way to learn. Participants work in small groups to take action to solve their problem and learn how to learn from that action. |

**Table 2.** Four Schools of Action Learning.

| School | Approach to learning | Approach to reflection |
|---|---|---|
| Tacit | Focus on problem-solving (learning the solution to the problem) | Reflection can happen but is not intentionally planned |
| Scientific | Focus on learning about the problem with heavy emphasis on the use of data and logical analysis | Reflection occurs through the use of questions generated by team members using evidence-based scientific method |
| Experiential | Focus on problem framing and problem setting as well as personal learning and development | Action learning coach leads intentional, explicit reflection throughout the process to help learners become self-aware and reflect on personal learning goals |
| Critical Reflection | Focus on organizational and individual transformation through examination and reevaluation of taken-for-granted assumptions | Action learning coach leads reflection and helps participants uncover, challenge, and change assumptions about the organization and themselves that shape their views and actions |

*Source.* Adapted from O'Neil (1999).

reflection, and what they have the opportunity to reflect upon. The experiential and the critical reflection schools operationalize reflection as a key component of the AL design. In contrast, the tacit school assumes reflection will occur because the situation encountered is unfamiliar; the scientific school structures reflection through evidence-based scientific methods. We draw our examples of reflective practices from the experiential and critical reflection schools that distinguish themselves by use of intentional cycles of action and reflection that help frame and reframe the problem.

The experiential AL school is based on some form of Kolb's (2015) experiential learning cycle: having an experience, reflecting on that experience, conceptualizing the experience, and experimenting with new ideas. The experiential school places clear emphasis on the role of intentional, explicit reflection throughout the process. The critical reflection school emphasizes a deeper level of reflection. Its practitioners focus on helping participants surface underlying premises in their thinking. Mezirow (1991) calls this critical reflection, through which people recognize that their perceptions are filtered through uncritically accepted views, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings inherited from their own prior experience. Reformulation, reframing, and transformation of the presenting task or project happen when participants uncover misconceptions, norms, and expectations that were often hidden (Marsick & Watkins, 2001; Pedler, 1997; Senge, 1995).

All approaches support individual development, but support is explicit in the experiential and critical reflection schools. For example, the experiential school might ask participants to monitor progress toward personal learning goals which they define before teamwork begins (Yorks et al., 1999). The critical reflection school focuses on underlying premises in the thinking of participants and develops self-awareness by surfacing other views and supporting frequent, evidence-based feedback that helps learners recognize when and how their views are distorted or limited.

Because of their intentional emphasis on reflection, both experiential and critical reflection designs often include the support of an AL coach whose role is to proactively help reflection through various activities. AL coaches help participants generate new insights about the problem, the team, and themselves through a deeper level of questioning (O'Neil & Marsick, 2014). A key role of the coach is to develop a reflective practice over several sessions by following up on themes to help individual and team learning occur (O'Neil & Marsick, 2007). The coach can foster an attitude of inquiry (Sofo et al., 2010). Questions asked by the coach need to be both supportive and challenging (O'Neil & Marsick, 2007).

There are several approaches that AL coaches can use to stimulate reflection and learning. In the next section, we present an example of one of those AL approaches and how it was used as a "stand-alone" intervention in a leadership workshop.

## Example of AL Reflective Practice: ALCs

O'Neil and Marsick (2009) developed ALCs as a structured protocol of steps that build on one another to support deeper thinking about a complex, often systemic question that is not easily solved without peer learning input (Marsick & Maltbia, 2009; O'Neil & Marsick, 2009, 2014). The process takes the problem holder sequentially through recurring cycles of framing of the challenge as a question, unpacking meaning through sharing information, peer questioning to unlock mental models that make one blind to other points of view, identifying assumptions that underlie current ways of framing the challenge, reframing one's understanding of the situation, making more informed decisions, and taking informed action to address the challenge.

By helping the problem holder identify and examine underlying values, beliefs, and assumptions they cannot see they hold, new perspectives emerge. Marsick and Maltbia (2009) see ALC as a way to enable "people to see how they can change a situation by changing the way they frame it and act on it" (p. 162). The 5-step process which we detail in the next section relies on the power of insightful questions combined with reflection on practice.

## *Application of ALC in a Leadership Workshop*

ALC can be used within an AL program or as a separate learning activity (O'Neil & Marsick, 2014). We now present an example of how an ALC-based protocol was used in a leadership workshop. The workshop included 12 high-performing leaders from a California office of a global staffing firm. Based in San Francisco, the participants were part of a large New York–based staffing firm in a multi-billion-dollar, rapidly growing, and changing industry. They served the recruiting needs of large Silicon Valley technology firms in areas such as engineering, administration, recruiting, and sales. Although participants managed teams of people on fast-growing, multi-million-dollar accounts, they had little formal leadership training and expressed a need for leadership development to help them better manage their teams and businesses. Managers from the San Francisco office asked one of the coauthors who is also a leadership consultant and AL coach to design a workshop to help these high-performing talents further develop needed skills and competencies. After visiting the site, observing the culture, and meeting with top leadership, the AL coach recommended a "learning while doing" leadership development workshop inspired by the concept of ALC, where individuals would learn from their peers rather than receive formal instruction on specific pre-outlined topics.

## *The ALC Five-Step Process*

One week prior to the program, participants were asked to complete and submit a problem and challenge worksheet. This form was modeled after a critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) and asked each participant to identify a pressing problem or challenge in their professional life responding to the following criteria: (a) a complex problem or challenge with no obvious or known solution, (b) a problem with a solution that likely involved disagreement from responsible stakeholders, and (c) willingness to share the problem with a peer group. The worksheet also included blank space for participants to reflect on their learning goals, commitment to action, and observations after the workshop.

When the group met, the AL coach used an ALC 5-step process adapted from Marsick and Maltbia (2009) and O'Neil and Marsick (2009). Each problem holder went through the following key steps: (a) problem sharing, (b) open-ended questioning, (c) assumption sharing, (d) reframing, and (e) action planning. Table 3 presents the detailed process and steps.

Participants were split into four working groups. The AL coach separated managers from their subordinates and intentionally mixed groups to allow participants to gain

**Table 3.** A Five-Step Process for Action Learning Conversations.

| | |
|---|---|
| Step 1. Share problem (10 min) | • Problem holder (PH) shares background with group<br>• Peers ask clarifying questions<br>• Problem holder answers objective questions |
| Step 2. Open-ended questioning (5 min) | • Peers write down questions (no advice)<br>• Round robin sharing<br>• PH does not talk, only listens and writes<br>(3 min reflection)<br>• PH shares insights, peers listen, do not ask questions |
| Step 3. Assumption sharing (5 min) | • All write down assumptions: "I think," "if I were you"<br>• "Fly on the wall" group talks as if PH were absent<br>• PH does not talk, only listens and writes<br>(3 min reflection)<br>• PH shares insights, peers listen, do not ask questions |
| Step 4. Reframing (5 min) | • Peers write how each would now reframe the original question from the worksheet.<br>• Round robin sharing one reframe at a time<br>• PH does not talk, only listens and writes<br>(3 min reflection)<br>• PH shares insights, peers listen, do not ask questions |
| Step 5. Action planning and learning (5 min) | • PH writes down and shares goals next steps<br>○ Clarify the question?<br>○ Talk to more people?<br>○ Collect more information?<br>○ Try out solutions? |
| Group debrief | • All teams gather together<br>○ How did the process feel?<br>○ PH? Others?<br>○ What helped gain insight on initial question? |

*Source.* Adapted from O'Neil and Marsick (2009).
Note. PH = problem holder.

new insights. In the four assigned peer groups, each person took one 35-min turn. A member of the group was in charge of keeping time for each turn. Overall, each small group had around 2 hr to complete the round, then all groups reconvened for a debrief. As the group meetings were in process, the AL coach visited the different rooms and observed the interaction, responded to any questions about the process, and ensured that the problem holder was listening, not talking, and that the participants were following the process—including asking powerful questions. Participants reported positive learning which we review later in this article.

## AL Reflective Practices: A Review

The ALC example described above is only one of several AL reflective interventions available to enhance reflection and produce learning. In this section, we review other frequently used AL reflective practices, some designed to support peer learning and

**Table 4.** Frequently Used AL Reflective Processes and Tools.

| Focus | Processes | Tools |
|---|---|---|
| Collaborative peer learning | • Reflective conversations/ reflection in-action<br>• Reflection-on-action<br>• Reflective dialogue<br>• Assumptions (surface, examine, challenge) | • Critical incidents<br>• After action review<br>• Concept mapping |
| Individual learning | • ALC<br>• Fly on the wall<br>• Storytelling | • Personal learning goals<br>• Journaling/reflective journal<br>• Giving and receiving feedback |

*Note.* AL = action learning; ALC = action learning conversations.

some (like ALC) to support individual learning. Gray (2007) distinguishes reflective processes (which require facilitation or guided peer conversations) from reflective tools (which can be used as stand-alone or as an instrument). In Table 4, we use this distinction to summarize frequently used AL reflective practices both for collaborative and individual learning.

## *AL Reflective Processes and Tools for Collaborative Peer Learning*

AL often requires teams composed of nonexpert members to explore a complex organizational challenge. Reflective conversations (Gray, 2007) can help team members learn from their conversations and actions. Reflective conversations are a form of reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983) particularly valuable when in presence of uncertain and unique situations. Reflective conversations are different from conversations based on a model of technical rationality where knowledge is seen as independent of the practitioner's values or views. Instead, they require the practitioner to "act as an agent and through his or her transactions with the situations, help to shape it" (Gray, 2007, p. 505).

Reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983) is also frequently used in AL. Typically, AL coaches identify moments for the team to step back and reexamine the work accomplished as well as the processes employed by the team. Depending on the team's interactions, different types of questions—focusing either on the team's processes, interactions, planning, or understanding of the problem—can be used to generate learning.

Reflective dialogue (Gray, 2007) provides team members the opportunity to share thoughts and feelings on a particular subject as well as a way to self-reflect on reactions to the dialogue taking place. Tsang (2005) recommends approaching reflective dialogue as a process involving both external and internal dialogue. Internal dialogue helps participants to pay attention to their feelings, thoughts, assumptions as the dialogue takes place. Two of the authors co-teach an AL workshop at Columbia University Teachers College and use reflective dialogues to invite

participants to slow down, listen to their listening, and question their assumptions as they listen to others' points of view.

AL teams typically work on complex projects which pose ambiguous questions. Because it is particularly important that team members recognize that the project can be approached in many different ways, AL coaches pay special attention to the ways team members share their understanding of what the problem is. The AL action planning cycle developed by O'Neil and Marsick (2007, pp. 78–79) emphasizes the need to have team members make time and space to explicitly discuss, examine, and challenge their assumptions when the project starts. Team members are often surprised that the same question can be so differently interpreted and understood. Those discussions often lead to reframing of the project or the question.

## *AL Reflective Processes and Tools for Individual Learning*

Many AL programs also support individual development. The ALC example described earlier is one of those practices used during an AL program to help team members surface embedded assumptions and develop new perspectives about a challenge they are facing. This particular intervention often works better if facilitated by an AL coach. It is also useful if the AL coach is skilled in supporting deep personal reflection (as opposed to a process consultant who typically focuses on finding solutions to a problem).

"Fly on the Wall" (O'Neil & Marsick, 2007, p. 115) is another example of AL reflective practice used for personal development. This process was demonstrated in Step 3 of the ALC example (see Table 3). It works as follows: a team member shares an area for personal development with the team and gives some information about the context as well as steps taken so far to support development. The team then holds a conversation while the person in focus watches and listens. They share assumptions they think the person holds or that they might hold in his or her shoes that reveal alternative views on the situation. During the process, the team member listens and takes notes, but does not talk. At the end of the conversation, the team member is invited back and reflects on how the conversation helped uncover blind spots and generate new perspectives.

Storytelling (Gold & Holman, 2001; Gray, 2007) can also help increase self-awareness about values, ideas, and norms. Participants, for example, might be invited to share stories about previous experiences of teamwork and then revisit those experiences as the program unfolds.

A reflective journal is a powerful tool to help AL participants reflect and write about themselves, leadership, or insights into system change (O'Neil & Marsick, 2007, p. 93). To foster individual reflection, critical incidents (Flanagan, 1954) can help participants develop new insights by examining turning points experienced while doing AL.

AL provides many opportunities to learn through feedback. When inviting team members to provide feedback a growth perspective is encouraged, with the use of open and spacious reflective questions such as "what I most appreciated about you" and "what I learned from you."

## Transferring Learning From AL Reflective Practices

Successful transfer of learning requires that knowledge or skill gains in a classroom be subsequently applied in work situations. One challenge is the difference between context and conditions in the original classroom versus the workplace. Reflective practices applied closer to the context of work can help problem holders focus directly on a familiar challenge. As a result, the application gap may be mediated because the problem holder's need is immediate and motivation to solve it is high.

### *Just-in-Time, Not Just-in-Case: ALC Example of Learning Transfer*

The example of the ALC-based protocol discussed earlier illustrates the value of this just-in-time learning. One year after the program described, the 12 participants and their managers were asked to complete an on-line, anonymous survey with open-end questions. Many participants shared that the process of reframing their problem during the program led them to change the ways they approached their work and achieved better results. For example, this participant said,

> The problem I had was employees not ramping up fast enough within their first 90 days. Through the new perspective offered and setting time aside to really tackle the issue, I was able to set and meet tangible goals. This resulted in our recent hires, ramping up faster than anyone we have hired. Typically, it would take 6 months+ to start covering their cost, 2 of our most recent hires were able to achieve this is 3 months and we have been able to replicate this process.

Other participants reported that the process helped them tackle challenging issues more strategically. One participant shared: "I've tried to implement these steps and tools into major challenges that I face. Instead of being overwhelmed, I've been working on a more strategic and objective approach." Another one stated: "I've definitely created a bit more structure around resolving challenges."

Participants also reported that the ALC program impacted individual development and enhanced their capacity to collaborate and appreciate other perspectives on the challenges they were facing. For example, a participant said, "The biggest thing I noticed after the leadership workshop is the ability to work more cohesively. Individuals who did not work together on a day-to-day basis now seemed more comfortable chatting about certain challenges." Another participant described a "shift in communication style . . . particularly their choice of words and phrasing on their team." Another stressed "the ability to work more cohesively and being more comfortable chatting about certain challenges."

Even though these positive learning outcomes—better results, problem-solving, improved communication and teamwork—were self-reported by the participants and supported by management, the authors have found consistent feedback and results using ALC over the past 5–10 years. We now turn to research on AL-based practices to review what research tells us about learning transfer.

### *Learning Transfer From Other AL-Based Reflective Practices*

Leaders we have coached in AL initiatives often value transfer of AL reflective practices to their workplace. These tools help these leaders, so they then use these tools in leading and coaching their teams. Current evaluation research, while sparse, documents this transfer (O'Neil & Marsick, 2007) and provides some examples of post-program transfer of reflective learning practices. An early study (Yorks et al., 1999) at Integrated Foods (pseudonym) reported that at least half of participating managers transferred "behaviors around sharing information (which was seldom done before), an openness to the opinions of others, a higher level of reflection and ability to listen to others, and encouragement of dialogue from and with staff" (p. 66); these changes supported individual and company-wide goals.

Ward (2008) conducted one of a few comprehensive studies of the impact of an AL program on participating individuals, with both baseline and post-program measures of targeted behaviors the company sought to improve. His study showed that AL reflective practices do get transferred and used to learn back on the job, and that this does improve performance. He studied several cycles of a corporate leadership development program focusing on "specific competencies (questioning insight, reflection/critical reflection, and participant specific learning goals)" along with "perceived performance improvement resulting from the transfer of these competencies." He reported that "questioning insight transferred the least" possibly because of "the difficulty in challenging one's assumptions about how new perspectives or information fits with current worldview" (pp. 166–167). Nonetheless, about half of the leaders tackled problems differently than they did prior to the program using reflective practice through an iterative process over time (see Figure 1). Leaders engaged in inquiry with others and sought to be open through questioning to alternative interpretations—even when habit or strong organizational culture made it difficult to challenge the status quo. This opened the door to innovation, which the company valued due to a changing environment and marketplace.

Cho and Egan's (2010) review of 50 empirical studies on AL program outcomes showed that half the programs favored personal development over organization development. Leadership development programs likely focus first on individuals. But it is also likely that—as Brook et al. (2012) argue—without organizational change, individuals have difficulty in transferring reflective practices or other learning gains back at work. This may be one factor that helps explain why Ward's (2008) research showed limited transfer of some AL learning strategies. Brook et al. (2012) argue, "An individualistic focus . . . limits the growth of collective understanding and competence in organizations" (Brook et al., 2012, as cited in Pedler, 1997, p. 251). When Ward (2008) researched individual learning transfer and found limited questioning insight, it is possible that if an organization had changed incentives, rewards, and encouragement for questioning insight, individuals might have more easily challenged worldviews in ways that created new organizational competence.

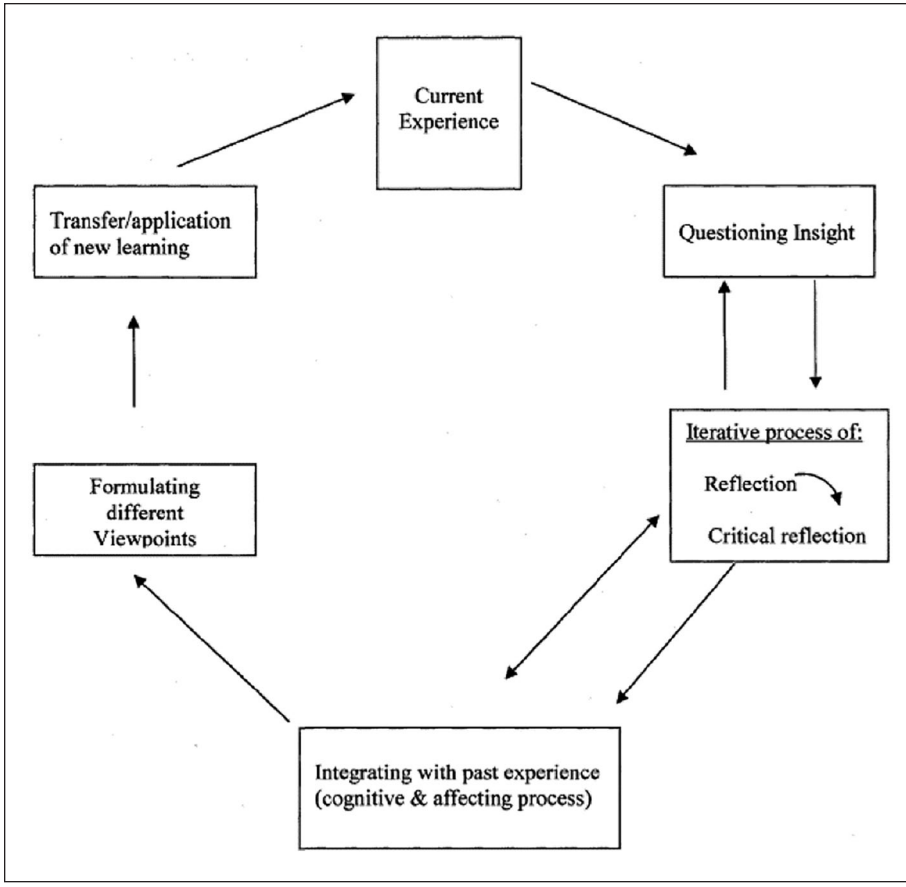


**Figure 1.** Reflection/critical reflection: an iterative learning process (Ward, 2008, p. 172).

## *Potential of Theory-of-Change Models*

Theory-of-change models can examine impact on individuals that, in turn, can have organizational impact (O'Neil & Marsick, 2007; Watkins et al., 2011). Such studies can show the organization, and its leaders, how to improve support for transfer of reflective learning practices. Watkins et al. (2011), for example, examined transfer of learning from an AL leadership development program over several levels and cycles in a medical devices company. They identified "processes of co-reflective practice among managers as a community of practitioners" (p. 211) as a program outcome and traced impact across levels in the organization. At the organizational level, they described impact on a culture of up and downstream leadership, a common language, and stronger affiliation with the organization as one that invests in its people that was linked to program components (p. 217).

Another example is provided by O'Neil et al. (2019) who examined the impact of a leadership program designed for physician leaders in a regional nonprofit health care system that included AL as a key component. Four teams of five to eight physician leaders met in person on a monthly basis over a 6-month period with a learning coach to reflect on the project and their individual development. The four organizationally sponsored projects addressed questions such as How do we align incentives between independents and the system? How do we reduce leakage? How do we enhance innovation and clinical excellence? How do we get physicians communicating in an effective manner? O'Neil and colleagues found that AL had a positive impact on networking and interpersonal relationships, and improved trust and collaboration among team members. Critical incident interviews showed impact on the physician's self-awareness and ability to develop multiple views and perspectives. In addition, program teams continued to work together to advance their projects into the broader organizational system.

## Implications for HRD Practice

In this article, we provided examples of AL reflective practices for peer learning and for individual learning and development. While there are several practical examples of application within this article, there are also important considerations for HRD leaders and practitioners.

We believe that, with some coaching, HRD practitioners and managers can successfully implement and use many examples presented in the article. ALC, for example, can be easily learned and applied by individual managers in their work with staff members or at team meetings. However, learning to ask powerful questions in organizations can be a challenge and often requires practice. A manager who might consider implementing those reflective practices may not be ready to hear challenging questions from subordinates or to accept views other than those of the organization or the direction the manager has already committed. As noted earlier, transfer of AL reflective practices at work transform organization practices and culture in ways that enable them to stimulate inquiry in their employees and develop greater organizational capacity for learning and innovation.

We recommend HRD practitioners consider the value of developing these capacities in their managers or internal coaches, or else use AL-trained coaches when taking these practices to their organization. O'Neil and Marsick (2007, 2014) see AL coaching as a catalyst to learning for innovation in complex, ambiguous situations. They share guidelines for using these tools, as do others who write about AL (e.g., Marquardt, 1999; Pedler, 2016a, 2016b). Several reflective practices presented in this article can greatly benefit from the intervention of an AL coach especially for activities requiring deeper examination and questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions.

When adapting AL practices, one also needs to keep in mind that reflective practices encourage critical reflection which can be challenging to the organization (Nicolaides & Poell, this Issue; Walker & Oldford, this Issue). The output from a critical reflective practice can create "noise" as participants are being asked to reflect on

deeply held assumptions, mental models, and issues that the organization would not have previously treated as items for discussion (O'Neil & Marsick, 2014). Despite these potential issues, AL coaching, as we describe and practice it, can produce learning and problem-solving in complex, ambiguous situations.

AL was developed in England by Reg Revans (Boshyk & Dilworth, 2010). Although it is practiced globally, human resource developers need to take cultural differences into consideration when advocating and adapting its use. In Italy, ALC has been used with health professionals (Striano et al., 2016); with families (Bracci et al., 2018); and in higher education to develop work-related soft skills, and project learning on E.U. policy (Spennati, 2020a, 2020b). Bong and Cho (2017) have researched differences between the Korean and non-Korean context, for example, and raise questions about cultural differences embodied in ideas such as Brook et al.'s (2016) study of "unlearning" or the Taoist idea of "non-action" (Hsu, 2013) they find might be relevant for action learning. Practitioners will want to adapt AL to national culture.

When creating space for reflection, one also needs to be aware that the relationship and ability to conduct authentic conversations can be influenced by power dynamics and status differences. Learning is inextricably bound to power relations within a social, cultural, and historical context (Billett, 2002; Contu & Willmott, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991). This is the reason why many of those reflective practices can benefit from the use of an internal or external coach who can pay attention to those dynamics (O'Neil & Marsick, 2014).

With constant change and the need to develop the capacity to adapt, AL reflective strategies offer a tool for continuous learning and adaptation to changing circumstances. Eraut (2004) suggested that a key skill needed in workplace learning is pattern recognition, which requires the ability to go beyond selecting diagnoses and details that conform to cognitive biases shaped by prior experiences. Going beyond our limited viewpoints calls for opening our minds to alternative perspectives. AL reflective practices are well-suited to developing this capability. We infer that opening up the organizational culture and practices to evidence-based, informed questioning and reflective practice will go a long way to equip organizations with increased capacity to innovate and solve complex problems that require cross-boundary, and cross-discipline, exploration.

## Conclusion

This article discussed a number of AL reflective practices which operationalize reflection in the workplace. Despite limited research on learning outcomes, there is some documented evidence and much anecdotal practitioner data on what works and how to enhance effectiveness in particular situations (Watkins et al., 2019). Further research is needed with stronger baseline/posttest designs that examines links between individual learning gains and whether/how that impacts organizational capacity for learning and change; and what is needed to adapt AL reflective practices in different cultures.

Theory-of-change studies offer promising ways to identify factors that support or inhibit reflective learning transfer as links in a series of if-then causal interventions

adapted to, and in particular, organizational contexts. These not only support outcome evaluation but also help managers to adjust strategies in action to get better results.

We contend that professional and leadership development in organizations is increasingly self-directed, budget and time constrained; that it is most effective when designed to engage with others to learn in the action of doing. The appreciation of reflective questions—the ability to pose useful and discriminating questions and acquire insight—can lead to effective problem-solving and leadership development.

In a thought-provoking article, Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg (2017) boldly asks organizational leaders: "are you solving the right problem?" and advocates principles for effective reframing noting that as powerful as reframing can be, it takes time and practice. Similarly, Marquardt (1999) in his book *Leading with Questions* notes that when leaders start encouraging questions from their teams, they begin to see amazing results.

We agree—as do those following Revans' original emphasis that learning is driven by questioning insight, not programmed wisdom from the past—that focusing on questions—the very core of AL reflective practices—rather than answers will help organizations build skills necessary to tackle complex problems. AL reflective practices can help HRD practitioners help organizational members develop such skills.

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